DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 419 CS 506 270

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TITLE Communicating within Organizational Cultures. ERIC Digest No. 5, 1988.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 88
CONTRACT RI888-06-2001
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; *Communication Research; *Language Role; Metaphors; *Organizational Communication; *Speech Communication; Technical Writing; Values; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; Japan; *Organizational Culture

ABSTRACT

In the present decade, many management and organizational communication scholars have explored a guiding metaphor--organizational culture. Japanese industry has developed a corporate model that may have provided the concepts involved in organizational culture: ideology, beliefs, rituals, myths, and symbols. Organizational culture is inextricably interwoven with speech communication, but organizational communication entails more than just speech communication. A recent survey has found that professional communicators rate the ability to define corporate and communications objectives as their most important concerns. Technical writing is also a prime concern of corporate professionals. The manner in which organizations and the people who work within them use language is directly related to the concept of organizational culture, since language is the prime element with which values are articulated and communications are transmitted and understood. (MS)

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ERIC DIGEST ▪ Number 5, 1988
Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ED296419

Communicating within organizational cultures

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Before the present decade, the *systems* metaphor guided organizational communication research. But for the past several years, many management and organizational communication scholars have explored another guiding metaphor—*organizational culture* (Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982).

Explications of the metaphor

Organizational culture has been defined as "a system of shared values (what is important) and beliefs (how things work) that interact with a company's people, organizational structures, and control systems to produce behavioral norms (the way things are done around here)." (Uttal, as quoted by Leontiou, 1987)

This anthropological perspective probably owes its existence to the acceptance and wide dissemination of the ideas of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, but Kendall (1986) traces the emergence of the organizational culture metaphor directly to the setbacks experienced by American industry in the face of Japanese competition. Scores of books and articles have suggested that the phenomenal Japanese success can be attributed to the strong organizational cultures found in Japanese industry.

The Japanese corporate model may have provided the concepts involved in organizational culture: ideology, beliefs, rituals, myths, symbols. In support of this assertion, Kendall cites an article by William Starbuck which claims that "when number crunching has failed to solve organizational crises, theorists have turned to ideology." In any case, mass market business books by John Naisbitt, Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy, and Tom Peters have explored the idea of organizational culture with great success in recent years.

Deal and Kennedy (1982) identified four key attributes of organizational cultures: *values*, the philosophies and beliefs shared by members of the organization; *heroes*, those who articulate the organization's values as a vision of the organization's role and future; *rituals and rites*, activities through which organizational beliefs are celebrated and reinforced; and *communication network*, the informal interaction among members of an organization that can reinforce, elaborate on, and realistically clarify and/or qualify the impact of values, heroes, and rituals.

Ethical implications of the metaphor

A critical approach to the use and abuse of power in corporations frequently calls for broader cultural perspectives and has led many to endorse ethical commitments regarding corporate social responsibility. According to Peppers (1988), a freemarket economy undisciplined by a common set of ethical standards can easily become an economy of greed. He considers that it is every business leader's responsibility to himself, to his company, and to society to insure that his management people at least think about the ethics of their business activities from time to time.

The modern model of a socially responsible corporate organization is a proactive one, and corporate communicators are now concerned with articulating the ethical framework of an organization (Toth and Trujillo, 1987). Although professional associations usually develop codes of ethics, teaching ethics—an ancient discipline—in schools, as Peppers proposes, can be focused on almost any level. Thomas (1985) recommends beginning with the study of literary, political, and philosophical materials.

Greenberg (1986) proposes incorporating a unit on communication ethics in an introductory college speech course, while Halpern (1987) has developed a college-level course on raising ethical issues in novels and other literature with themes related to the world of business.

Diverse applications of the metaphor

In scholarly research, the culture concept has been used for naturalistic examinations of such diverse subjects as an automobile dealership (Valentine *et al.*, 1985), AT&T (Kendall, 1986), a sales team at a media representation firm (Leontiou, 1987), an urban hospital (Heller and Freeman, 1987), and Disneyland (Smith and Eisenberg, 1987).

Smith and Eisenberg's article on Disneyland centers on conflict and dissent—an element present in most bureaucratic organizations. In their view, alternative interpretations of culture are always available: individuals enter organizations with pre-existing frameworks for thinking about work, and successful organizations find ways of coping with their members' multiple goals and interpretations. However, it is not difficult to see that for a neophyte, only a period of time spent actually working in an organization will yield knowledge about its mores and institutional history, as well as the behavior expected of its employees..

The role of language and communications

Organizational culture is inextricably interwoven with speech communication, but organizational communication entails more than just speech communication. In a recent opinion survey of 590 professional communicators, Patterson (1988) found that these professionals rated writing and the ability to define corporate and communications objectives as their most important concerns.

Toth and Trujillo's (1987) research supports the results of Patterson's study. They suggest that corporate communication has become a multifaceted process that connects the organization with a variety of publics—internal and external. These publics include shareholders, corporate boards of directors, customers, regulators and legislators, employees, media, and the general community. The two researchers believe that a unified set of concepts from public relations, organizational communication, and management research

can help the public better understand the changing (and more complex) role of corporate communications. The concepts which they pinpoint as critical to an understanding of corporate communications are language, structure, roles, technology, power, and social responsibility.

Technical writing is an increasingly important type of corporate communication and one in which corporate culture clearly intersects with the classroom. Each organization speaks its own language and exhibits a unique personality. Because an organization's product manuals, public relations pronouncements, and correspondence all contribute to the corporate voice, writers new to an organization need to be aware of their role in establishing corporate culture as well as their obligation to adjust the tone of their writing to the culture as it exists. Teachers of organizational writing can help students by making them explicitly aware of a general need to adapt writing to the environment (Rawlins, 1988).

Implications for instruction

Redding (1985) adopts a critical approach to the study of organizational culture and is another of the few to suggest ways in which college speech communication teachers can prepare students to cope with the organizational world. Redding first articulates some of the traditional purposes of speech communication courses: 1) to teach techniques calculated to make a speaker more "successful" in gaining understanding or acceptance from an audience and 2) to help would-be employees learn how to get along (primarily a matter of communicating) with their future superiors. He adds that "the world into which we are sending our students is almost always an organizational, bureaucratic world...and the most basic fact of life in the typical bureaucratic organization is hierarchy."

Redding argues that college speech communication teachers should be consciousness-raisers, with a duty to expose students to the total spectrum of the real organizational world. He advocates class discussions and assignments based on the communication problems of dissenters, boat-rockers, and whistle-blowers, as well as role-playing exercises in which students have the opportunity to experiment with various communication strategies employed in the manager-dissenter interaction. Students should be encouraged to think seriously about the organizational cultures in which they will spend the rest of their lives. Speech communication teachers should also help their students practice other specific strategies for expressing dissent in an organization, such as gentle persuasion, oblique hints, recruiting allies for political maneuvering, and neutral presentation of "objective" information.

The manner in which organizations and the people who work within them use language is directly related to the concept of organizational culture, since language is the prime element with which values are articulated, heroes purport those values, most rites and ceremonies are conducted, and communications are transmitted and understood.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. R188062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.